

# CRITICAL THINKING: the foundation of American university education

In academic writing, the most important skill to utilize is critical thinking. Critical thinking requires you to learn *actively* instead of passively accepting what you hear, see, and read as the truth. As we say here in the U.S., “don’t be a sponge.” In other words, don’t just soak up information (like a sponge soaks up water) without thinking about it carefully and evaluating its truth and value. Being an active thinker means that you question every piece of information presented to you (on TV, online, by professors, everything!) instead of simply accepting it as true. Active, critical thinking means that you develop a set of criteria (standards or requirements) to help you decide what is and is not logical, probable, fair, complete, and original. Thinking critically is very difficult at first, but it becomes easier and more natural the more you practice thinking critically. You cannot be a good writer, reader, student, or citizen without learning to think critically.

Critical thinking is NOT:                      simply memorizing information and treating everything like a “fact”  
    making statements or giving opinions without good, logical reasons that make sense  
    making judgements without knowing as much as possible about a topic, evaluating this  
    information carefully, and having good, clear reasons for having an opinion

Critical thinking IS:                              questioning all information and opinion—no matter where it comes from  
    learning as much as possible about a topic before judging and forming an opinion  
    considering as many other perspectives, views, arguments on/about a topic as possible  
    using analysis, logic, honesty, fairness, completeness, and objectivity in all evaluations

Basically, being a critical thinker means having and using a clear set of criteria (rules or steps) and consistent method of evaluating information and generating beliefs and opinions. Thinking critically is more difficult when you’re new at it because your criteria isn’t developed yet and can be hard to remember; as well, you may feel overwhelmed, frustrated, and/or confused by the amount of work (such as reading, researching, inquiring, etc.) it takes to learn about a topic fully. However, these troubles are temporary: the more you practice paying attention to detail and looking at a topic from as many angles as possible, the more naturally this process of thinking becomes for you. Instead of being difficult, exhausting, and time-consuming work, eventually thinking critically becomes an innate intellectual habit and process you engage in naturally rather than by following a long list of steps and rules. The sooner you develop this habit the better. To think critically is to think in the way of the university: it is the single most important skill you must learn if you want to succeed in your studies. And—most importantly—strong critical thinking is the foundation of true intelligence.

**IN WRITING**, critical thinking can be defined as *thinking about a topic carefully and completely, doing your best to think of something unique and original to say about that topic, and using logical, intellectual support to explain what you have to say*. In an essay, you want your thesis to be something that makes your readers say, “I never thought about it that way,” or, even better, “I never thought about it that way...you may be *right*!” You want your thesis to answer the questions “so what?” and “who cares?” It means you have something original and meaningful to offer your readers. It means that you give your reader a reason to keep reading. It means giving your reader something insightful to consider.

## CRITICAL THINKING ACTIVITIES

Thinking critically requires you to consider a topic in several different ways and from many different perspectives. To make it simple, we could divide critical thinking into these activities, which are outlined below.

|                   |  |
|-------------------|--|
| Observations      | From what we see, experience, hear, notice, read, etc. we can create a set of  |
| Facts             | From a set of facts—or from an absence of facts—we make  |
| Judgements        | From our judgement of information, we can make   |
| Assumptions       | From our assumptions about what is true, we form   |
| Opinions          | From our opinions, we use rational and logical thinking to develop   |
| Arguments         | And when we want to challenge the arguments of others, we use  |
| Critical Analysis | Through which we challenge the observations, facts, judgements, assumptions, and opinions in the arguments that we analyze |

To put it differently, to think critically means to engage in the “academic conversation,” in which knowledge is never “achieved” but rather can only continue to grow and build on itself. To be a critical thinker, you must understand that creating and understanding arguments—yours and others’—are not the final word but part of an ongoing debate.

## EXAMPLES OF GOOD & BAD CRITICAL THINKING...

**EXAMPLE #1** Paper Focus: The dangers of nuclear weapons

Weak Critical Thinking: "Nuclear weapons are bad for society because they can hurt many people."

*What does this really tell readers? Everyone knows that nuclear weapons can "hurt many people." This statement does not show deep thinking because it does not offer the reader a new, interesting, or original perspective or idea on the topic of nuclear weapons. The statement is obvious.*

Better Critical Thinking: "Nuclear Weapons have the devastating ability to destroy massive amounts of people and landscape. Not only this, the damage from nuclear weapons is ongoing; that is, their damage does not simply end when the bomb explodes, their after-effects are measured in generations, not years."

*This statement is better because it presents a fresh and interesting angle (perspective) on the idea of nuclear weapons. The writer is more clearly involved in the topic, has thought more deeply about the dangers of nuclear weapons., and has narrowed and focused the topic more specifically on the idea of after-effects lasting generations.*

**EXAMPLE #2** Paper Focus: Being biracial in American society

Weak Critical Thinking: "Being biracial is hard."

*Although the topic itself could be interesting, the writer has not offered the reader much to think about. After reading this statement, the reader is likely to think, "Why is it hard?" This statement fails to answer the question: "Who cares?"*

Better Critical Thinking: "Being biracial in American society is a struggle between being white or black, black or Asian, Native American or white—whichever way your ethnicity is split."

*This statement is better because it gives the reader something to think about. Notice the emphasis (italics) on the word "or," which indicates that biracial people are pressured to identify with only one part of their ethnicity—they can't be both, a mixture. The writer focuses on this struggle, which makes it more thoughtful and interesting for the reader.*

### CRITICAL THINKING HOMEWORK

In the following example activities, I have given you a paper focus and a weak statement. It is your job to come up something that would show better critical thinking skills by explaining specifically *why* this thinking is weak and writing a new thesis statement that demonstrates better critical thinking.

**TOTAL POINTS: 24 (6 points per question—3 for first question and 3 for second question). Write your answers on a separate piece of paper; you may handwrite or type. Answer in complete sentences and be specific!**

1. Paper Focus: Some effects of racism  
Weak Statement: "Racism is wrong."

Why is this a weak statement?

Write a new statement that shows better critical thinking skills about this topic.

2. Paper Focus: Reasons why capital punishment (the death penalty) should be illegal  
Weak Statement: "Capital punishment hurts people."

Why is this a weak statement?

Write a new statement that shows better critical thinking skills about this topic.

3. Paper Focus: For international students, living in a dorm is better than living off-campus.  
Weak Statement: "Living in the dorm is better for international students because they will not feel lonely because many people will be around them."

Why is this a weak statement?

Write a new statement that shows better critical thinking skills about this topic.

4. Paper Focus: Public transportation should be used more often in today's society.  
Weak Statement: "Driving a car is a lot of fun, but it is dangerous for society."

Why is this a weak statement?

Write a new statement that shows better critical thinking skills about this topic.